

THE BLACK HAND GANG

and Madame Musseine

by David Edwards

Foreword

Bravery strengthens the will to live, a will for Good against the Evil hidden in our world.

There are many known obstacles put in the way of our heroes but many more are still to be discovered.

However, defeating an evil enemy takes more than bravery and hope.

Therefore, it required a very special boy to lead his friends on their dangerous quest.

In 2013, it was time for Jack George to step forward.

David Edwards, November 2013

Chapter 1

The volcano

The light was intense from 1000 computer screens. A white light interspersed with patches of colour. The light blue of Facebook and the pink of a child's face, usually smiling in the profile photos that were aligned in a horseshoe shape around the silent black hulk.

There were 10 screens mounted vertically and 100 horizontally, creating a modern glass screen suspended from cables of reinforced steel that reached into the darkness above.

But some of the screens had dark grey backgrounds with a black hand turning anti-clockwise at their centre. 30 degrees at a time and twelve times each minute to make a complete revolution. At the midnight position, the hand implied stop! Danger! A signal, warning you away from the blackness beyond, where you would be lost in the bowels of the internet. The hands resembled a reversing set of clocks with three fingers and a thumb etched in the blackest of black. On each hand, the little finger was missing, creating a terrifying claw that reached out from the depths of the screen. The glass wall had hundreds of hands that relentlessly revolved until it was their time to disappear, as a screen saver was de-activated to admit another electronic victim for an online chat with the faceless MM.

Madame Musseine, or MM as she was known to the children playing the game on her world domination website. It was an electronic game with no consequences, a bit of a laugh with a couple of letters to identify your foe. Word of mouth had made it a popular game to play via the sponsored online app within Facebook. The automatic translation between English and Chinese, Spanish and French and every popular language in the world made your distant new mates appear stupid as their sensible comments were mistranslated for you but that made it

even more fun. It was a fantastic game because it could be played 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, in real time across the globe. You against the world; a prime motivator in its appeal.

The huge leather chair creaked as Madame Musseine leaned backwards, her giant legs and feet supported on a padded hydraulic rest, barely wide enough to hold the splayed fat and muscle. Her arms were resting either side of the giant keyboard, especially designed for her massive fingers to feverishly jab at the keys as she messaged the junior gamers. Her teeth reflected the variety of colours emitted by the screens as she smiled, but the colours were stained by the brown rot. She was the ugliest person on this earth with bulbous lips and a fat nose, she had no left ear only a gaping hole. MM was dark skinned apart from the lighter coloured scar down her left cheek, a memory from her first knife fight in the dock area of Marseille, Southern France, at the age of ten. Her greasy black hair clung to the headrest until she shook her curly but lank locks in frustration as someone beat her on the game. It was the first child to win in that week and that made her snarl with anger as drool dripped from her lips.

‘Techno!’ She howled the name and listened to it echo off the hidden walls of the volcano. ‘Techno, come here now!’ A shadow of a man slipped into the pulsing light of the screens and grovelled beside her. Techno was 20 years old and had served his mistress for five years as her geeky lap dog. Born in East London, he had run away from home at age 15, leaving his younger brother and mum to fend for themselves. His dad had run away years before and Techno was too scared to assume the responsibilities of running a house, of being a man, and so he had run as well. It was in Marseille whilst earning a paltry living mending equipment in a gaming arcade that Twip Twop had found him. Twip Twop was one of the first of Madame

Musseine's henchmen, a short and vicious albino from Greece. But Techno was tall and gangly, with a mop of red hair above his thin white face. He kept his eyes to the floor as he spoke.

'You shouted me Madame?'

'No you stupid man, I shouted you twice. Where have you been you lazy piece of scum?' He kept his head bowed and moved slightly away from her side but it was too late as her huge hand slapped across the side of his face. He was hit so hard, that he felt the imprint of her stunted hand on his cheek as it immediately glowed red with pain.

'I'm so sorry Madame Musseine, please forgive me. I was redesigning the new stealth gyroscope. So sorry Madame.' He grovelled in front of her as she eased her bulk out of the greasy chair and towered above him. At 160 kilos and 3 metres tall, she scared everyone she met, so it was lucky the real world never saw her now.

'Fix the program geek. I never want to be beaten again.' After kicking him harshly, she lumbered away into the darkness and headed for the distant light pouring through a metal door set in the granite rock. Squeezing through it, she rolled her way down the long tunnel that led to her quarters located 700 metres below the summit of Mount Kibo, the dormant volcano that made up Mount Kilimanjaro. She made a mental note to see the gyroscope the next morning and demand that Techno should resolve the issue with the hydrogen engines or else... Tests had shown that water droplets created within the twin exhausts were visible on radar defence systems and that was unacceptable. She would give him a week to resolve the issue, and after that? Well, in The Black Hand Gang there was no 'after' when a gang member had failed to meet her wishes.

* * *

Jack George sat with his long legs outstretched and perched above his head as he slumped in the red IKEA chair. Each foot lay either side of his PC screen, alternatively tapping to the beat of The Ebb and Flow, the cool new San Francisco based band that all of his friends hated. He brushed the wire of his iPod headphones away from his keyboard and messaged Roger, also called the splodger, since tipping a can of emulsion over his parent's best carpet. The boys chatted every evening using Facebook, as they saw very little of each other during the school term but that would end shortly when Roger Ponsonby-Smythe returned home from Eton, the Public School, to the pretty village of Christleton in Cheshire. Jack lived at the end of the village in a small red brick cottage with a central blue door. It was set into the hillside near the golf course where the old sandstone quarry had closed in the 1930s. This was the working class end of the village, whereas The Ponsonby-Smythes resided at the old manor house at the centre of the upper classes, adjacent to the large pond with its ancient ducking stool. Roger's dad Rupert could afford it, as he was 'something' in the city. Dealing in shares and all that, whilst his mother Maria went to the gym and 'did lunch' with her many acquaintances, usually for this or that charity. Jack never called them Rupert and Maria, they were always The Ponsonby-Smythes to him, Mr or Mrs, this respect was given by most of the poorer locals including Jack's parents. They were defined as poor because they lived in a house worth less than 150,000 pounds as opposed to those of the rich worth more than one million.

'What time do you get home on Saturday splodger?' Jack turned the volume up on his iPod as he waited for a response. The screen was blinking, informing him that his mate was typing. 'Luncheon, old chap. See you then what!' Splodger always wrote and spoke like this, even before Eton. Jack typed quickly.

‘Luncheon? You great woosy. Is that a nice ham sarnie or caviar and champagne mate?’ Jack tapped the keys harder, Facebook was slow tonight but the extra force could not budge the electronic congestion. Maybe his dad was using the wifi again? Silly dad, he had no idea what he was doing on the internet, he could barely find the football reports on the BBC website until his boy had shown him how.

‘Look Jack, one doesn’t eat caviar on a Saturday. It’s like fish – one only partakes on a Friday or Christmas day. By the way, has one seen the app for the world domination game?’

‘Huh?’ Jack kept it brief as usual.

‘MM’s app, I sent it to you as a game request last week. I tell you what, it is absolutely excellent.’

There was a knock at the door and dad’s face slowly appeared as he gently pushed it open. The top of his bald head came first before the green eyes and smiling but apologetic face.

‘Hiya, just a warning. Mum will be home in ten minutes so I suggest you get ready for bed before she arrives. You know what she’s like!’ Jack arched his back making a bridge from the top of his chair to the shelf of the PC table. At the age of 12, he was strong and athletic. Already over 2.3 metres tall, he resembled Alex Strider in the films. A handsome boy with blonde spiky hair cut to a number three and gelled. Jack pulled his headphones from his ears with a pop.

‘What?’ His dad shook his head as he replied kindly.

‘I said mum will be home soon so get ready for bed mate.’

‘Okay dad, love you, night.’ Dad was dismissed and the head retracted as the door was shut softly. Jack loved his dad Jonathan, and spent most of the week in his care. Jonathan stayed at home as a househusband whilst his mum lived away all week whilst she was working on

contract as an IS consultant. But the loss of his mum made Jack love her more. It also made him more rebellious and so he opened the app for world domination instead of going to bed.

“Challenge other children across the countries of the world by selecting opponents and trading the assets of your country. Gold and currency, kilometres of motorway and acres of forest, your fishing or naval fleet. Every asset in your country is available to you to defeat your global opponents who will use theirs. Be clever and use them carefully in this ultimate challenge. Only the best will progress through 1000 levels of dominance to be the ultimate leader of our known universe.”

The computer graphics were fantastic as Jack quickly flicked through the asset lists and names of the competitors in France. He knew some of the cities like Avignon since his school visit at Easter and recognised some of the names from the exchange trip. “*Sur le pont d’Avignon*”, the song rang in his head as he scrolled down the screen. There was tall Thierry, Jean-Claude in his red jeans...I heard a car door as it was loudly slammed outside the cottage and so he rapidly hit the off button on the PC and scampered across to his bed. Quickly, he took off his ‘Man U’ T-shirt and pulled the duvet over his Adidas tracksuit bottoms. A minute later, his mum Jennifer gently opened the door and walked smiling to sit on the side of his bed. She leaned towards him and kissed his cheek. Jack resisted the temptation to wipe the slobber away.

‘Hi mum, did you have a good week?’

‘Yes my love and tonight is the best part. Coming home to you and dad.’

‘And Timmo the dimmo.’ She tucked the duvet tighter around his shoulders as she reprimanded him.

‘Timothy is your brother Jack. He’s not dim, just four years younger than you. You know that makes a big difference.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Whatever, whatever or fabtastic, you have a way with words young man.’ She said this in the patronising way that mums did when they thought they were cool. ‘Both of you boys talk a foreign language to your dad and I.’ He smiled at her. He desperately missed his mum during the week but would never admit to it.

‘Not foreign, just the way kids talk like when they are at PGL.’ Jennifer patted his short hair and immediately he smoothed his hands upwards to re-do it and look good asleep.

‘Mum!’

She sighed heavily. ‘See, I give up. What’s PGL?’

‘Parents Get Lost – you know after the adventure holiday company.’ Jack constantly dreamed of a week at PGL. Kayaking, sailing, climbing and abseiling. It would always be a dream as he knew they were lucky to have a single week’s family holiday in a caravan in Wales. She leaned forward.

‘Remember to clean your teeth PGL man and remember how much I love you when you go to sleep.’

‘Yeah, yeah. Wider than the sky and bigger than the sea.’

‘Precisely lovely. Now go to sleep and give your dad and I, our time. Nightie nightie.’

‘Pyjamas, pyjamas.’ He replied whilst grinning.

As mum left the room, Jack had a quick bout of guilt. He had cleaned his teeth two days earlier, surely that was enough? Reluctantly he went to the bathroom but on his return the temptation was too strong to resist and so he rebooted his PC and started to play the game. He knew his parents wouldn’t bother him again. His first adversary, naturally enough, was Roger

the splodger. Within ten minutes, Roger had trounced him by trading five cruise missiles for Jack's starting assets that had been assigned by the gamemaster – a mere two bazookas. As Jack turned off the PC and crept quietly back into his bed he vowed two things. Firstly, to beat Roger and secondly to become the best player on this new game called 'the world of domination'. He turned on his side and closed his eyes remembering the awesome graphics. It was so realistic; it certainly looked like the greatest game ever.

* * *

As Madamee Musseine and Jack George peacefully slept, there was frenetic activity on level three in the hidden complex beneath Mount Kilimanjaro. Level three, contained the technical department that supported The Black Hand Gang and was bigger than the largest sports stadium in the world. It was gigantic, more than 50 per cent wider than Wembley stadium in London, England. Sector one contained the computer servers and the advanced input consoles, AICs, shaped like the shell of a snail. Inside each AIC was a 1.5 metre Visual Display Unit, a twelve-speaker system including a sub-woofer mounted beneath the soft yellow seat and several methods to both input and receive data. Most of the technicians used the technology designed by Techno, called the encephalitic input and output device, rather than an old-fashioned keyboard. They had nicknamed it "the brain hugger" as eight large, sharp steel clips pressed onto their skulls to link their brains to the servers and thus send and receive data. There were two distinct disadvantages to offset the one hundred-fold increase in speed of data transfer. Firstly, the brain hugger worked better if they shaved their heads each morning before starting work and secondly the clips dug deeply into the outer layers of thin skin stretched across the skull, which caused hideous and protruding scabs to form overnight.

Inevitably, these scabs were accidentally shaven off at the start of each day in the pursuit of technical efficiency. The technicians were used to the daily pain this caused but found it extremely tiresome having to stem the flow of blood with bits of toilet tissue.

Techno was sat in an AIC, his tired eyes bulged as he worked and his head oozed blood from the two brain huggers he had attached. No one else had his giant capacity to process double the amount of information but he was Techno, and that was the way his mind worked. He slurped a slug of 'fat coke' from the can before popping an Oreo biscuit into his mouth. Energy was paramount to get him through the night. He knew the game program needed to be modified by 8 am on the coming day or he would be fried. He set an example for both hard work and superhuman brainpower and most of the other technicians desperately tried to emulate him.

Sector two on level three contained the engineering department. The gyroscope was stood in the centre of it, in pride of position as five top Chinese scientists delicately screwed the new gel shields into the exhausts that would absorb the bothersome water vapour. If the modification worked, they would have to build 20 more of the flying machines by the end of August, which was a tall order.

Sector three, and still on level three, was accommodation. Meals could be taken at the Indian or Chinese restaurant, The Kentucky Fried Chicken and the ever popular McDonalds, only few personnel used the boring canteen which served the odd vegetable. In fact, no one who worked for MM was aged over 25 years and therefore most loved the junk food. All of them had been secretly recruited during her ten-year reign that was building to the climax, a worldwide terrorist attack. Now all the preparations were nearly ready, a few more months and the master plan would be complete. At any time, sector three contained one third of her workers. There were strict eight-hour shifts and beds maintained body warmth as one shift of

workers vacated them ready for others to dive-in. The technicians though, had their own beds and they slept when they could. But the workers didn't dislike the swap-over as it paid in the winter time. Despite the heat from the magma deep in the volcano below them, the extreme altitude meant there were deep snow drifts behind their natural ceiling causing the cold to penetrate into their meagre quarters.

Sector four on level three was the fun zone, which kept most of the workers happy. A games area comprising 5-a-side football, basketball, tennis, table tennis and the latest gadgets from all over the world. The star attraction in July 2013, was the new four dimensional gaming pack that felt so real as one battled through the war in Syria or within the Mysteries of Mars. In addition, the worker's and technician's pay was superb at cowing all thoughts of insurrection. However, Madame Musseine was always concerned that someone would betray her secrets. She paid each worker ten times the salary applicable in the outside world and each technician twenty times the norm. The money was electronically transferred to any bank of their choice from several of her organisation's ghost accounts. The mens' employment contracts stated they could always leave with one year's notice. But nobody left anymore. There were too many rumours about what happened to the leavers...that was where the fear of level two had started.

Level two. Immediately below Madame Musseine's private quarters on level one and thus nearly at the top of the volcano. An ideal location to prevent any enemies from reaching their leader under the peak of the mountain. Level two contained the muscle. Fifty secret policemen for internal affairs and 100 ninja fighters, all men. There were no women in the complex as MM wanted no distractions in her terrorist cell.

And then there was Biceps. The Frenchman was larger than MM. His huge muscled arms appeared to be bursting from his black T-shirt but his waist was thin and his legs were like

tree trunks – strong and thick. Above the monstrous body was a flat Corsican face, he had the same coloured skin as MM and the same black lank hair. Some said he was her brother. Others, that he was cloned by her first rogue scientist who had been her only friend thirty years before. No one would ever know the truth, but Biceps was respected as her general and feared for his ferocity in any sort of fight, whether it was with bare hands, any weapon, in fact anything that could kill. It didn't matter whether he was in a scuba suit or hanging off the side of a cliff. The man was a natural born killer and would die rather than let anyone hurt Madame Musseine. Why? The workers queried.

Because he loved her. That deep unrequited love, like a puppy dog for his mistress.

Therefore a volcano is a deceptive place in more ways than one. At nearly 6000 metres high it is able to contain many secrets. The early explorers of the area in 1848 described the fear of the local tribesmen and their reluctance to climb this mountain because of “resident man-eating spirits”. Eruptions over the last 300,000 years have created passageways and caverns that remain secret, only explored by Madame Musseine and her three henchmen. Level four didn't exist for the technicians and ninjas until they choose to leave MM's employ. Level four contained ancient waters that flowed inland 300 kilometres from the sea. Salty, black water that was best left unexplored.

* * *

That was the volcano in Tanzania, near the northern border with Kenya, sandwiched between the Serengeti and The Indian Ocean. It was a hive of activity but totally secret and guarded for miles around by the Maasai who had been 'bought' by Biceps. Their job was to maintain

MM's external security and every tribesman within the area had sworn an oath of secrecy at a traditional ceremony where they had drunk the blood from a sacred black cow mixed with the beast's own milk. In return they had been given guns to protect their families and fight their enemies, the Sukuma tribe.

The added ingredient was 100 ml of their own human blood. This truly brought them close to their god, Engai Narok, the black warrior.

It was also Biceps who initiated each of MM's new recruits when they commenced work within the volcano. In the depths of Level one was a small stream of hot molten lava and in the flow of this stream was an island topped with a branding iron heated to 180 degrees Celsius by the red stream that curled about its lower edges. Any new recruit pledged his loyalty whilst stood naively afraid in front of the island, wondering what was going to happen. The branding iron's shape was simple but grotesque. It consisted of a hand made up of a thumb and three fingers but with the little finger missing. The words for the pledge by the recruit were etched into the rock holding back the fiery stream and ran like this.

"I join the Black Hand Gang knowing my life belongs to Madame Musseine. She feeds me and protects me and makes sure my family are always cared for. In return, I pledge to her 100 per cent loyalty for the rest of my life."

At the end of the nervously spoken pledge, Biceps who always stood behind the recruit, would grasp their arms and push the left hand forward and onto the super-heated branding iron. Madame Musseine would often lie in bed and listen to the screams as new apostles joined her gang. The immediate pain lasted two to three seconds as the shape of the stunted hand was burnt into the top three layers of skin but the lasting pain was from the loss of the little finger as Biceps ripped the hand of the recruit off the iron and held it in flow of the red

molten rock. He would sniff the aroma of burnt meat as the little finger roasted away and then laugh uncontrollably when he finally let the person slump to the cave floor.

* * *

A scream had woken MM and so she rolled off the triple bed and lumbered towards her balcony. She pressed a large green button and waited patiently as the louvres of the blast screen silently opened. Stretching her arms above her head she stared at the savannah 5000 metres below. She could see for 60 kilometres or more. Immediately to the side shone the pure snowfields and way below were herds of elephant moving towards the West in line astern but resembling a trail of ants at this stratospheric height. Gazelle leapt from the nearest watering hole as two cheetahs sped towards them. The killers divided, one to grab the neck of the oldest gazelle and the other, the youngest, in a pincer movement. She laughed insanely, it was good to be alive that morning. She spoke to the blue sky above.

‘The young die because of inexperience when they don’t understand the rules of the game as they play and learn but the old die because they think they know the rules. However, not if it is a new game! Now the world will succumb to me, starting with the young!’ Her cackling reverberated off the rock walls and out into the fresh air and bright sunlight of East Africa.

* * *

In deepest Cheshire, Jack George jerked awake as a high-pitched scream came from the kitchen immediately below his bedroom. Leaping out of bed, he sped down the stairs, three at a time and pushed the door open to see his dad sucking the little finger of his left hand.

‘Dad! What’s the matter?’ Jack ran over to him and clung to his side as if a young child once again. But Jack was only a head shorter than his dad now and nearly a teenager, nearly a man.

‘Bugger me if it wasn’t the frying pan.’ Jack looked behind his dad and saw the spitting bacon before he registered the delightful aroma. ‘It’s okay, I’ve only gone and burned my little pinkie mate.’ His boy heaved a sigh of relief and grinned as he gently told him off.

‘In that case you can make me a bacon sarnie with extra tomato ketchup for waking me up so early!’

‘So early? It’s nearly 9 o’clock for goodness sake’.

‘And also because I won’t tell mum you said bugger again!’ Dad pushed him away and gently cuffed his ear. As they shadow boxed, they both forget the hurt finger, until Jack grabbed it without thinking, ensuring an even louder scream ripped through the house bringing both mum and Timothy running to the kitchen. It was a normal start to a family weekend in Christleton. Happiness and fun in Cheshire, the opposite of what was lurking in deepest Africa where Evil was about to be released onto the world.

Chapter 2

The gang of four

It was Saturday at last and the warm sun glowed on Jack from a bright blue sky as he paused under the arbour of sweet smelling honeysuckle. He tentatively held out a finger to place it next to the pink and white flowers and watched in fascination as a large bee settled upon it. He could feel all six of its hairy legs as it explored right to the end of his nail, flicking its proboscis in rapid licks before it buzzed off to find a flower that contained nectar instead of blood.

That was Jack, always brave and pushing the boundaries of conventional life.

The black and white cottage in front of him had been Kate's grandma's home since she was born 73 years previously. Grandma claimed she had been born on the night of the full moon at 7 pm on the 7th day of the 7th month and that was why she was psychic, and that meant she could predict the future. Kate had once calculated and informed grandma that her birth date of 1940 was equally auspicious. She had added the individual numbers together, $1+9+4+0$, it made 14 i.e. two sevens and therefore quite magical for many people on earth who believed in the superstitious nonsense of numbers. Grandma had commented on the date too. It was auspicious, it was the start of World War II. Grandma had also told most visiting children that she weighed 7 kilos at birth, which was really far-fetched. But Kate saw things that others didn't, that others missed, and knew that her grandma could have unique insights into the future, and these always came true. But Kate would never share that knowledge, they would think she was as crazy as grandma if they knew she saw things too...

The pretty cottage nestled under a straw thatched roof and stood halfway between Jack's house and The Old Manor house where Roger was due home at 12 noon.

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